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The Church Union Situation

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An Address Delivered in the Presbyterian Church at Alberton, P. E. I. August 31st, 1924

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BY

REV. J. KEIR FRASER, D. D.

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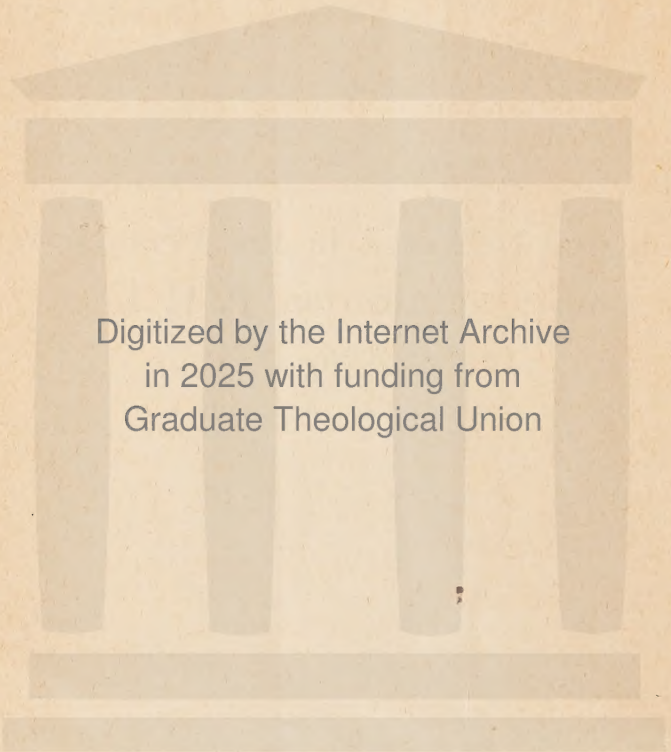

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THE CHURCH UNION SITUATION

An Address Delivered in the Presbyterian Church at Alberton, P. E. I., August 31st, 1924, by

REV. J. KEIR FRASER, D. D.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has reached the parting of the ways. We are passing through the greatest crisis in her long and honored history—the greatest crisis, I believe, in the history of any Protestant Church since the Reformation not excepting even the "disruption" in Scotland under *Thomas Chalmers* in the year 1843 which gave birth to the Free Church of Scotland. The present, therefore, is no time for *bitterness* or *prejudice,* but rather for *serious thinking* and *earnest prayer.* It is because of this that I have the courage to speak to you this morning on the *present situation of the "Church Union" movement in Canada,* and to help you—if I may be so used by God—in coming to some decision as to what your future action must be as a congregation in the difficult position in which you will find yourselves placed during the coming months. Let us study this question calmly and dispassionately this morning. In view of the gravity of the situation I am confident I am going to receive from every one of you an unprejudiced hearing because, however widely we may differ on questions of *"organic Church Union,"* I can not but believe that we are all agreed on the infinitely more important question of *"Spiritual Unity"*—that unity which *St. Paul* had in mind when he spok about *"Keeping the Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

And in anything that I say this morning I hope you will not think that I am reflecting in any way on the great *Methodist* Church. Nothing could be further from my thoughts. No one could have a higher regard for that Church than I have. She has had an illustrious history. When *John* and *Charles Wesley* were born in the 18th century *Morality and Religion* were dead in *England; Deism* was rampant everywhere; the great masses of the people were sunken in degradation; and the greatness of England today is due not to her industrial supremacy but to that moral and spiritual revival which swept over the country under the *Wesleys* in the 18th century. *Methodism* has been an untold blessing to the world; she has a message peculiarly her own; and it is because of this that I regret seeing her enter the merger which is to be known as the *"United Church of Canada."* I believe that in taking this step she will lose something that is distinctive to her, and the Kingdom of God on earth will suffer thereby. Furthermore, in fighting the battle of *"religious liberty"* as we have been doing, we have been fighting it for the *Methodists* as truly as for the *Presbyterians.* We have been fighting it for every church in Can-

ada because if the recent action of the Federal Parliament is *constitutional* no church is safe. Any church any day may by an Act of Parliament be legislated out of existence, and the great principle of *"Religious Liberty"* for which your fathers fought and died be destroyed.

And lest you should be in danger of misunderstanding me this morning there is a *second* thing which I wish to make clear to you at the outset, viz. this: that throughout all this controversy of the past year no one, so far as I know at least, raised any objection to those who wished to form a Union with the other negotiating churches being given full liberty to do so. On the contrary we were fighting for this very thing—*religious liberty for all.* We may not have thought this Union would be a good thing either for those who entered it or for the Kingdom; but this was their own concern, and if they wanted it we maintained that they had a right to have it. But *we claimed the same liberty for ourselves*—viz: *to remain in the Church of our choice.* The fight was not against *"Church Union,"* but against a *bill* which destroyed the principle of *"religious liberty,"* and secured by parliamentary enactment a so-called Union at the sacrifice of a great historic Church, the continuance of which was desired by scores of thousands of its members. What crime, I ask, has the Presbyterian Church committed that she should be legislated out of existence? Why should the Church for which my father gave his life, and which I learned to love at my mother's knee, and whose founders are now sleeping in yonder cemetery, and within whose fold I want to live and die—why should this Church be taken from me by Act of Parliament, and I, its child, be driven into the wilderness to fare as best I may? What have I done to deserve such treatment? Will you please come to me at the close of this service and answer this question? No one has answered it yet except to say that a little group of some four hundred ministers and elders gathered at a General Assembly which did not represent the Church with its 400,000 communicants composing the great body of the people, and another bunch of politicians at Ottawa, many of them not members of any Church, and most of them thinking of their next election, willed that it should be so. If you have any more satisfactory answer to my question, you will lay me under everlasting obligation if you let me have it. But what I am trying to make clear to you here is the real issue in the struggle antedating the passing of the Union Bill by our Federal Parliament at its recent session, viz: that this issue was not *"Church Union"* (to which no one objected) but *"religious liberty"*. It is of prime importance, in my judgment, that this be clearly understood. It is important to remember that the issue was not one of *creed* or *Church Government* I don't like the creedal statement of the new Church. It is an attempted compromise between two conflicting systems of theology and gets you nowhere. It is

a weak, flabby, milk-and-water thing. And such as it is the clergy are not asked to subscribe to it, but can teach and preach what they please. Personally I would be satisfied with a very simple creed—a statement of the fundamental facts of the Christian faith. and then be left free to work out my own philosophy of these facts. I am not contending for a literal interpretation of the *"Confession of Faith,"* although whatever you say about that venerable document it has at least this to its credit—that it has made *moral backbone;* it has produced *strong men,* men who stood for principle and who, if necessary, were ready to die for it.

Nor do I care very much for the *polity* contained in the basis of Union of the new Church. It is certainly not *Presbyterian.*

But these questions, important as they are, do not touch the real issue in this struggle. Even suppose we assume that the "United Church" is going to have a *creed* that is *perfect, a system of Government* that is *perfect,* that the *Church itself* will be *perfect,* or as perfect as any human organization can be, the question still remains: has Parliament any right to legislate me into that Church against my will? Has it any right to take from me by law the Church of my choice? My Church may be a poor one, but have I not a right to remain in it if I want to do so? Do I not enjoy the right of religious liberty and can Parliament or any other court—ecclesiastical or civil—rob me of that right?

This was the issue at stake in the Church Union Controversy, and if at the outset we are clear on this point it will clear the ground and prepare us for much that is to follow in our study of this question this morning. It will also, I think, give us a more sympathetic understanding with one another, and perhaps remove some of the bitterness that may have characterized this unseemly controversy—some of the unnecessary bitterness may I say.

Having said this I am going to ask you to come with me while I seek to give you a brief history of the *"Church Union Movement"* from its beginning in the year 1902 up to the present time. We shall thus see just where we stand today and what the facts are which must determine our future action.

The movement originated with the *Methodist* Church at its quadrennial conference held in *Winnipeg* 22 years ago. This Conference passed a declaration in favor of organic Church Union among the Protestant Churches in Canada, and then proceeded to invite by name the *Congregational and Presbyterian* Churches to confer with them as to the steps which might be taken to bring these three bodies into organic union with one another.

This finding was communicated to the 1903 meeting of our General Assembly and by it referred to the Committee on Correspondence.

The following year (1904) a joint meeting of the union committee of the three churches was held at which it was unanimously agreed that "any union to be real and lasting must carry with it *the consent of the entire membership of the churches.*" This report was submitted to our Assembly of 1905 and was unanimously adopted as the policy of the church.

After a lapse of *six* years the Assembly decided to take a vote of the people, the question asked being: *"Are you in favor of organic Union with the Methodist and Congregational Churches?"* To this question about 37 per cent. of our members answered *"Yes."* This was the largest vote ever polled by *Presbyterians* in favor of Union. True, of those who voted a large majority voted for Union but approximately only about half of our members voted. You ask why was this? Well, I have asked this question of a number of people who failed to record their vote both at this referendum and that of 1915, and without exception their reply was that they did not consider it worth while for the reason that they had the pledge of the General Assembly that Union would never be consummated until there was a unanimous request on the part of our people, and that therefore *not to vote* meant practically *a vote against union.* This sounds reasonable because it is evident that in 1903 when our Assembly appointed its first committee on "Union" it entertained no greater hope than that of *an increased friendly co-operation* with the *Methodist* church especially in the field of *Home Missions.* Its object was to prevent *rivalry* and *waste of men and means* through overlapping in the mission work of the churches especially in the West and newer districts of the country. When the question of appointing this committee was being considered it was urged by those in favor of it that "to decline a proposal for a committee to confer would not be courteous to a sister church."

But whatever you say as to this after the vote of 1911 had been recorded the General Assembly adopted the following resolution:

> "In view of the extent of the minority which is not yet convinced that organic union is the best method of expressing the unity sincerely desired by all the Assembly deems it unwise immediately to proceed to consummate the union but believes that by further conference and discussion practically unanimous action can be secured within a reasonable time."

Four years later a second vote was taken when 32 per cent. of our people voted for union. In other words within *four* years the vote *against* union had increased 23,000 and the vote *for* union ony 600. Imagine the surprise then when in June, 1916, the news flashed over the wires that the General Assembly meeting in *Winnipeg* had ignored this greatly increased opposition of the people, as well as its own previous declarations as to the necessary

unanimity, and resolved to proceed at once to the consummation of union. Is it any wonder that a wave of indignation swept over the Church when it found that it had been betrayed by its highest Court? Some of those who felt this most were members of the Assembly who afterwards confessed that they were stampeded into voting without really knowing what they were voting for. This Assembly has gone down into history under the name of the *'Stampede Assembly."*

It was in the late summer of that year that the *"Presbyterian Church Association"* was organized, not to prevent the formation of the United Church by those who were in favor of such a Church, but simply to see that steps might be taken to preserve the continuance of the Presbyterian Church for those who wished to remain in that Church.

So strong did the opposition to Union grow after the action of the Winnipeg Assembly that the Assembly of 1917 agreed to halt the movement until the second year after the War, and "in order to secure peace in the meantime it urged that controversy over the matter of organic union be dropped by all parities, and that no attempt be made at the present time to set forth in detail the action appropriate to a future period, but that the church paitently await the new light which it may receive by Divine guidance through the growing experience of the people and the lessons of the War."

And so the question remained until 1921 when the General Assembly, without referring the question to the people resolved to proceed to the consummation of Union. Where the "new light" came from through "the growing experience of the people" *when the people were not consulted,* I leave it to you to say.

Then in the autumn of 1922 appeared the now famous Bill adopted by the Union Committee and the General Assembly of 1923, according to which it was proposed by Act of Parliament to obliterate as separate entities the three negotiating churches and merge them into an entirely new church to be known as the *"United Church of Canada."*

By the provisions of this Bill the ministers and members of the three churches together with all their Church property became a part of the new Church. Without being consulted you who were *Presbyterians* were to be placed by law into a Church which many of you did not wish to join and in which you did not believe. Within six months of the passing of the Act you were to be allowed to vote yourselves out of this merger if you were not satisfied to remain in it. But out into what?—Into nothing! Your Church was gone, stolen from you by Act of Parliament at the request of your venerable General Assembly. History, so far as I know, has

no record of any case of ecclesiastical tyranny that equals this. Personally all through the long controversy that followed the adoption of this Bill by our Union Committee I took a conciliatory attitude. I saw at once that if the Bill was accepted by the General Assembly and forwarded to Parliament for its sanction, it would mean the *inevitable disruption of the Presbyterian Church in Canada,* and I believed that such *disruption* would be too big a price to pay for the *so-called Union* that would be secured by the passing of the Bill. So without expressing my opinion as to the *injustice* or *illegality* of the Bill I wrote a letter to the *"Presbyterian Witness"* suggesting a compromise in the nature of another vote of the people, and recommending that if it should be shown by such a vote that a majority of our members favored the Bill, we all cease our opposition and enter the Union. I also urged this in letters which I wrote to the secular press.

When this plea failed I pressed for an *Amended Bill* allowing the Presbyterian Church to remain as it is in possession of its rights and property, and granting to those who wished with the Methodists and Congregationalists to form a United Church full liberty to do so, taking with them their share of the Church property which would be distributed on an equitable basis by a Commission appointed especially for that purpose. In this way I felt the *coercive* feature of the Bill would be removed; equal liberty would be granted to all; and a Bill would be presented to Parliament which would meet with no opposition for the simple reason that it would represent not a majority—nor even a minority—of the Church, but the Church as a whole, *Principal Gordon* of Queens University, one of the original advocates of Union, made a similar appeal as did others, many of whom had voted for Union in 1911 and again in 1915. But all such appeals failed. Our socalled Union leaders in their stupidity and blindness were determined to press for the passage of the Bill, and you know the result. You know that our Church today is rent in twain from Atlantic to Pacific. And the reason for this is a complete reversal of policy on the part of our Church leaders. *Principal Gordon,* in a letter to the *Hon. E. M. McDonald,* Minister of Defence—in a letter read in the House of Commons when the Bill was being considered —said that if it had been known that the Church Union controversy would have led to the disruption of the Presbyterian Church the movement would have been stopped in its early stages.

In 1906 at the *London* Assembly, *Dr. Patrick, of Winnipeg,* to whom the idea of *"Organic Union"* first suggested itself used these words:

"From first to last the question must be a people's question—they were not expecting a judgment even from the Assembly."

And listen to *Sir Robert Falconer* at the same Assembly:

'From the commencement," he said, "I have put it in the forefront that it would be utter madness to go forward to a Union that did not carry the whole Church with it. It was absurd to think that the Assembly could force its will on the people."

And listen to *Dr. W. J. Clark,* Convenor of the Union Committee at the Assembly of 1914 just before the second vote was taken:

"If it proved by this vote that a considerable majority is not in favor of Union, I would regret the fact, but would not force the issue."

And *Dr. Herridge* in 1915 when he was the retiring moderator of the Assembly said:

"I believe the matter must go on, the question must go to the people, and if the vote is not more decisive than the last vote I would oppose taking further action."

Well, we have seen how much more decisive it was when the opposition had increased 23,000. In view of these promises were not the General Assembly and the Union leaders committed to a policy of referendum to the people? We are worshipping this morning in a Christian Church, and I submit to you that these promises were moral! Our people had the right to trust their leaders who made these pledges. You say the Assembly was under promise to the *Methodist and Congregational* Churches to consummate Union, and that it had to keep faith with these Churches. But what about keeping faith with our own people? These Churches knew that there was an understanding that Union would not be consummated until there was a clear and unmistakable mandate from the people. This was universally agreed to at the first Joint Meeting of the Union Committees. In view of this whom is responsible for the division in our Church today? Is it not the Union leaders who disregarded these pledges?

Then we must remember that since the last vote was taken more than 100,000 new members have been added to the Church. Moreover, at least 50,000 returned soldiers, members of the *Presbyterian* Church, in the year 1915, when this vote was taken were fighting your battle for civil freedom on the fields of Flanders and the plains of Northern France. Was it British fair play to deprive these men of the privileges of expressing themselves on the question as to whether or not their Church was to be legislated out of existence?

But you say the General Assembly has decided to consummate Union and we must be loyal to the decision of our highest Court.

Where would you be today if *Martin Luther* had taken this position? He had the whole Church against him, and yet he said: *"God help me, I can do none other."* Loyalty to the Kingdom may mean the sacrifice of a great many personal interests, but it doesn't mean the sacrifice of principle. It never means that. No court—*ecclesiastical or civil*—has the right to tell me how I am to worship my Maker. This is a matter for the individual conscience. But apart altogether from this the action of the General Assembly has never worried me because after a thorough and impartial study of the constitution of our Church I am confident that the Assembly acted *"ultra vires"* in passing the Union Bill. There is nothing in our Church Constitution that gives the Assembly this power. To use the words of our "Confession of Faith" the Church Courts are to act *"ministerially"*—that is to say they are to legislate for the Church, but they have no power to *end* the Church. This may be a matter for the civil courts to determine, and it is worth while asking: why was the General Assembly unwilling to leave the question with the Courts? Have you thought of that? Why did the Assembly at its meeting last June turn down the Amendment that "no further steps be taken in the direction of the consummation of Union until such time as the Civil Courts have decided upon the constitutionality of the Bill? Why did Paliament refuse to do this when it was told by the ablest constitutional lawyer in Canada that the Bill was unconstiutional? Why did it do the unprecedented thing of refusing to accept the recommendation of its own private Bills Committee that the passing of the Union Bill be made conditional upon the Courts declaring it to be constitutional? There are two rather ugly facts which face us: (1) The Unionists refused to submit the Bill to the people for their judgment, and (2) they refused to submit it to the Courts for a decision as to its constitutionality. I leave it to yourselves to explain these two facts as best you can.

But coming back to the question of *loyalty to the Assembly*. you say the Assembly decided to consummate Union. Which Assembly I ask? That of 1916? Yes. And the Assembly of the following year reversed this decision in that it decided not to proceed *at once* to the consummation of Union. The Assembly of 1921 practically reversed this decision. The Assembly of 1916 reversed the decision of the Assembly of 1912. So it would seem as if Assemblies allowed themselves a good deal of lattitude in the matter of reversing decisions of previous Assemblies. It looks like a sort of merry-go-round.

But apart from all this, *the Assembly does not represent the people*. It is composed of one minister out of six, and one elder out of six, none of whom are elected by the people. They do not represent even their own congregations, and in a number of in-

stances where the question of Church Union was being considered they voted contrary to the expressed wishes of their congregations. They represent no one but themselves. It is absurd to suppose that 400 men such as I and one of your elders should have the power to lead 400,000 Church *Members*, to say nothing of *adherents* into a big *"politico-religio"* merger (to use Dr. Chown's expression) which their conscience will not allow them to join. It is only *"ecclesiastics"* of the most extreme type who will talk in this way. Such people have no place in the Presbyterian Church which has always stood for *democracy and liberty*.

But I must hurry to a close, and I want you to listen carefully to these closing words because they are *constructive*.

As you are aware, a Bill was passed by Parlament at its recent session, according to which on the 10th day of *June*, 1925, the *Presbyterian* Church in Canada, the *Methodist* Church of Canada, and the *Congregational* Churches of Canada cease to exist as separate entities and become merged into a new Church to be called *"The United Church of Canada."* This Bill, however, while retaining the essential principle of the original Bill to which I have referred, is yet a different Bill by reason of certain amendments which have been added, and contains for those who do not wish to enter the Union advantages which the original Bill did not contain. For one thing, instead of coming into effect the day it received the royal signature it does not become operative until the 10th day of June, 1925. Meantime the three Churches remain as they are.

But more important than this: According to the original Bill the moment it received the sanction of Parliament the members of the negotiating Churches became members of the United Church. They had no choice in the matter. They were legislated into the new Church whether they wished it or not, and then by a special clause of the Act congregations were given permission to vote themselves out within six months if they wished to do so. This has been changed. Any time within six months before the Act comes into effect congregations may vote not to enter the union, and if they so vote they will be deemed as never having been in. It will not be a case of voting out but rather of voting not to go in. Such congregations will remain Presbyterian. True, they will on the 10th day of June, 1925—for a few hours at least—be independent congregations because the *"Presbyterian Church in Canada"* will have ceased to exist, but on that day representatives of these congregations will meet in Toronto and organize *"the Presbyterian Church of Canada."* So you see, the Act as it now stands provides not only for the new *"United Church"* but also for a *Presbyterian Church* for those who wish to retain a *Presbyterian*

Church. So the old cry of *loyalty to the General Assembly requiring us to enter the united church* is gone for the reason that the Act of Parliament gives congregations the right either to enter the union or to remain out. And the General Assembly tacitly at least assented to this through its leaders who were present when the Bill was drafted and who were compelled to submit to its passage through the Commons and Senate. If they had not agreed to it they should have withdrawn the Bill, as they did in Ontario, and by failing to do so they practically assented to it.

So if on or after the tenth day of December next you meet as a congregation and vote not to enter the Union you are not acting any more disloyally to the Assembly than if you vote to enter the Union because the Bill which passed Parliament and was practically accepted by the *General Assembly* gives you your choice. I want you to be very clear on this point because you will doubtless be approached by shrewd ecclesastics who will try to make you believe that the *action of the Assembly* requires every congregation to enter the Union. They may deceive the simple, but don't let them deceive you. Ask them to go home and read Clause 10 of the Act, and then to remember that the Assembly did not withdraw the Bill because of the insertion of this clause, and that by failing to do so practically agreed to it.

Of course, this does not by a long way remove the *coercive* feature of the Bill, because it still takes our Church from us. The question remains, why should your congregation here be required to vote that it desires to remain *Presbyterian* in order not to be legislated into a Church which it does not wish to join? Why should it be disturbed at all? Our leaders say, only those churches which vote to be included in the union will be included. They ought to put it the other way, viz: only those churches which vote not to be included will stay out. It shouldn't be necessary to vote that you want to keep what belongs to you. You see my point, do you not?

Still we are very grateul for this amendment. Only don't thank the *"General Assembly" for it.* Thank the *opponents of union,* because it meant hard work on their part to get it. *"The Assembly"* would never have given it to you although much against their will its leaders had to acquiesce. They had to make at least this concession to us.

That hundreds of congregations are going to avail themselves of this clause and refuse to enter the united church I am confident. I am certain that a strong Presbyterian Church will be left in Canada. It may not be as strong *numerically* as it is at present, but

it will be a stronger church *spiritually;* it will be a *purified* church; and it will not be *political;* it will be free from *state control and state influence.* The *"Union Church"* will, I believe, be an autocratic organization *dominated by the clergy.* The whole union movement has been a movement of the *ministers.* The people don't want it; they never did want it. And the new church will simply be a *Methodist* church under another name. The *Presbyterians* who enter it will be outnumbered by the *Methodists* and they will be dominated by them as they deserve to be. I am not saying this will be a bad thing—I am simply stating a fact.

No matter what views we hold on the question of *"Church Union"* we all ought to be glad that there is going to be a *Presbyterian* Church left in Canada. Why, you ask? Simply because there are thousands and tens of thousands of Presbyterians who will not enter the United Church. This may be a cause for regret, but it is a fact we have to face. What will become of these people? Some will join other churches, but most of them will be lost to any church. If we are to hold these people we must retain a *Presbyterian* church. This is necessary in the interests of the Kingdom. Then there will be the immigrants of Presbyterian connection who will be coming to Canada in ever increasing numbers. What would they say if they found no Presbyterian Church in Canada, if they were debarred by law from worshipping in the Church of their choice? We must be prepared to take care of these people. And after all is said, will there not be room in this young expanding country for both churches? Can they not co-operate in the common work of building up in this Canada of ours that Kingdom which is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost?" If we must part can we not part as brothers of Christ and in the spirit of love, "laying aside all bitterness and anger and malice and evil speaking out of our mouths?"

In a few months you will be called on to decide what you are going to do as a church. It is not for me to advise you. But there are some questions you should seriously ask yourselves. One is, are you willing to take the responsibility of placing this old historic church into the so-called "united church?" I don't say you ought not to do so, but if you do you will be assuming a great responsibility. If a majority votes for Union it will, according to the

Act, carry with it all the congregational properties—the cemetery yonder, where lie the remains of the fathers and mothers who laid the foundation of Presbyterianism in the Western part of this Province, these tablets, everything. It will be hard on the *minority* who, unlike the minority in our cities where some churches are certain to remain out, will have no place to go. If on the other hand the *majority* decide to keep the church *Presbyteran, the minority* need not suffer because they can simply move up a block to the *Methodist* church and get the Union they are seeking as the *Methodist* church will then be a part of the *"United Church.."*

A second question you must ask yourselves is, are you willing to purchase *union* at the sacrifice of the disruption of this church, especially since it is possible for you to secure the union you are seeking without any serious disruption?

Another question you must ask is, has this church served its purpose as a Presbyterian Church? We all believe it was founded by God, called by Him to a great mission? Have we any reason to believe that this mission has been fulfilled? If not are we justified in ending the church? Have we any warrant for so doing? I am not answering this question, I am only asking it, and God will hold you responsible for the answer you give to it!

There is another thing we must not overlook, viz., this: That in entering the united church which, after all, is a man-made institution, organized by politicians after a persistent lobbying on the part of the Unionists such as was never before witnessed in the history of the Canadian Parliament—in entering this church we are forsaking a church which has stood the test of centuries, and which has been wonderfully blessed of God, for what is to be largely an experiment and which may not, and probably will not, prove a success? Is this, think you, a wise thing to do? What do you think of it simply as a business proposal? Does it not look like giving up a *certainty* for an *uncertainty?*

Then, let me say to you what I have already said to my own people in *Galt,* and what I propose saying to them again, viz., this: That in coming to a decision on this important question we must not consider personalities. There is a great principle at stake

here, a question which in its results reaches away into the distant future. If a congregation votes to enter the union it is in for all time. So I hope that the members of my church in deciding what to do in the matter will not consider my wishes, but will vote according to their consciences and convictions. There is a great responsibility resting upon all of us. This responsibility is personal. May God give us grace to measure up to it.

And shall we not pray that out of this strife and turmoil and unrest, which is agitating our church there will come in time, as there came in Scotland after the great disruption of 1843, a purged church, a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or blemish or any such thing.